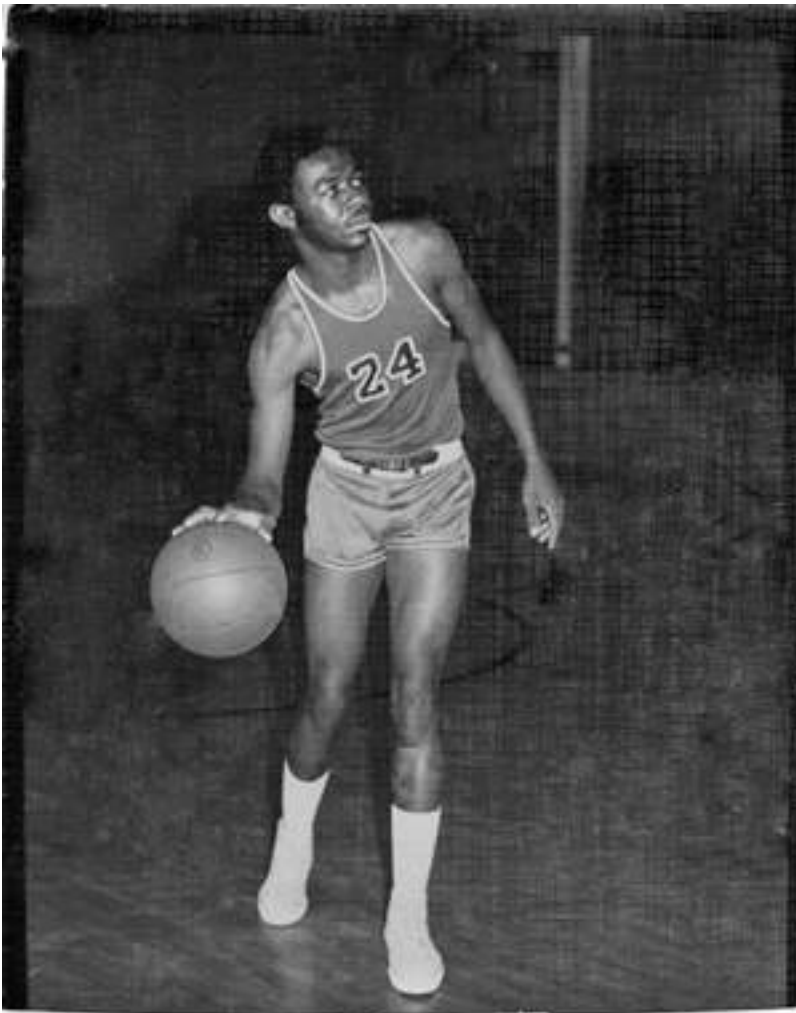


Forgotten treasure: Move over Wilt Chamberlain... Meet Bennie Fuller



Bennie Fuller on the court. / Special to the News Journal/Emogene Nutt



Written by
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In the world of the deaf, Bennie Fuller's name resonates like a midnight lightning strike.

He is THE LEGEND for the hearing- and speech-impaired.

Yes, 50 years ago this month, the Philadelphia Warriors' Wilt Chamberlain set an NBA scoring standard with 100 points against the New York Knicks.

But to the hearing- and speech-impaired, it is Bennie Fuller who is the legend.

At the Arkansas School for the Deaf, Jan. 19, 1971, is remembered as the date when Fuller became the country's only deaf player in

documented, state-association varsity basketball to reach the century mark, with 102 points.

Maybe more interesting, and serving as an addendum to what is a fascinating and mostly forgotten piece of basketball history, was the first collegiate field goal by Fuller 10 months later, against Lurleen Wallace Junior College. It's believed to be the first basket ever made at the college level by a deaf player on scholarship and at a hearing institution.

And Bennie Fuller did that in Pensacola, as a member of the Pensacola Junior College Pirates.

"It wasn't a story you went out looking for," said Jim Atkinson, Fuller's first coach at PJC in 1971-72.

"You look back on it now and, yeah, I've never heard of anything else like it. But I needed some players. I had heard of Bennie, he was obviously very good ... that's how it happened."

Record-breaking prep career

The short version of the Bennie Fuller story is easy.

During his high school senior season, 104 colleges at every level of competition made offers to the 6-foot-2 guard. It was based, for the most part, on Fuller's remarkable statistics since few colleges scouted a Class B deaf school. Yet his numbers were impressive:

- » The 102 points in a game is one of 15 recognized by national association records.
- » His senior season average of 50.9 points per game remains No. 3 all-time in the national high school record book.
- » His 4,896 career points rank fourth all-time.

Fuller made official campus visits to Arkansas, the University of Texas-El Paso, Memphis and Pensacola Junior College. PJC won, but that came with a twist, and that's where it is impossible to tell any part of this story in a short version.

Arkansas' first family of the deaf

Atkinson, an assistant on the coaching staff at the time, accepted the head job at PJC on an interim basis when Paul Norvell unexpectedly left during the spring recruiting period. The Pirates' program wasn't competitive in the old Division One Conference, so the new coach returned to some old roots for talent.

A native of Fordyce, Ark., where the legendary Paul "Bear" Bryant was born, Atkinson shared the same hometown as the state's first family of the deaf — the Nutts. All the children were born with either serious hearing or speech impairments, including Houston Nutt Sr., the only person to play for basketball coaching greats Adolph Rupp at Kentucky and Henry Iba at Oklahoma A&M.

Nutt, whose speech was impaired from birth, was the coach and athletic director at the Arkansas School for the Deaf (ASD). His brother, Clyde, was a sensational athlete who led the 1957 U.S. deaf basketball team to the world championship in Milan, Italy. Clyde's son, Donnie, was full-hearing and an accomplished player at the Little Rock public school, and he understood sign language.

Why did Fuller choose PJC? The school offered a vocational trade course in technical typesetting he was interested in, plus Atkinson offered a scholarship to Donnie Nutt. No other school could accommodate Fuller with a personal interpreter.

"I had heard of Bennie and what he had done like everyone else, plus I knew Houston was the head coach and athletic director," Atkinson said. "To be honest, I was trying to find someone to tie our next season to, that one player that would make it interesting for fans. To me, that had to be Bennie.

"Then I learned about Donnie. I didn't know how to (do sign language), and he was also a very good player. I had a spot, so we kind of got two birds with one stone there."

Fuller signed on April 28, 1971. The event drew a picture and story from the Arkansas Democrat, in which Atkinson was quoted: "I haven't seen him play a game. But, somebody that had his percentage and scored that many points, you can't go wrong with."

Record night was 'like a machine gun'

Fuller said the biggest surprise from the night he made history against Leola, a hearing high school, in Arkadelphia, Ark., was when the scorekeeper announced the final total: 1-0-2.

"At the time, to be honest, I didn't know I had 22 points in the first quarter and 44 points at halftime — I wasn't counting, we were just playing," Fuller said this week through a sign language interpreter during a videophone interview from his home in Oklahoma City, Okla. "And at the end, I had no idea I scored 38 points in the fourth quarter. It was like a machine gun, one after another, it was just nuts.

"I had some big nights before, and if I had to guess that night, I would have thought around 70. But they showed me the scorebook, it was incredible."

Fuller's linescore against Leola is amazing.

- » First quarter: 9 field goals, 4-of-5 free throws — 22 points.
- » Second quarter: 7 field goals, 8-of-11 free throws — 22 points.
- » Third quarter: 10 field goals — 20 points.
- » Fourth quarter: 15 field goals, 8-of-8 free throws — 38 points.

To put that into perspective for a 32-minute contest, Fuller averaged more than three points every minute. In the fourth quarter, the average jumped to nearly five points.

All this in an era that did not have the three-point shot.

After that game, while leading the Leopards to a 20-win season and a spot in the regional tournament, Fuller drew rows of scouts every night ASD played. He later earned a spot in the state all-star game and was selected MVP — four years before the great Sidney Moncrief would earn the same honor. The deaf boy from rural Hensley, Ark., who at the age of 8 learned to shoot a basketball into a makeshift hoop made from an old bicycle wheel, was named an All-American and signed a college scholarship with PJC.

This was a first for the deaf community. And it also was the beginning of the end of Fuller's basketball story.

Shooting star fades at PJC

It wasn't as if Fuller didn't excel at PJC. He did — for one season.

During a nightmarish 7-18 season in 1971-72 for the Pirates, the Arkansas connection was the talk of Pensacola. Atkinson said Fuller averaged more than 30 points a game while the school's newspaper, Corsair, reported Donnie Nutt averaged 21.

But the school didn't retain Atkinson, replacing him with Rich Daly from Moberly (Mo.) Junior College for the 1972-73 season. Fuller and Nutt became role players as Daly brought in a national cast of players. That group led PJC to a 26-4 record its first season, and reached the No. 1 ranking in the country while finishing 30-3 in 1973-74.

"Pensacola was a good experience for me and my situation in a lot of ways," Fuller said. "Don went with me, it was a deal and that really worked — he was a really good man. I learned to be independent, I got my two-year degree; there were a lot of things that helped me.

"The basketball, though ... I wasn't terribly happy with the team. The first year, the other players complained I would lead in points all the time, but I couldn't help it. Then the coaches changed — I just planned to leave Pensacola, but my parents tried to keep me there "» and I did, for their sake."

"Bennie was a special kid, and you had to admire what he had done because it was something I had never heard of being accomplished by a player before then or anytime since. But he wasn't in the league of the players we brought in," said Daly, who left PJC after five seasons, eventually spending the final 20 years of his career as the top assistant and lead recruiter for Norm Stewart at Missouri.

Wilt Chamberlain of deaf community

After PJC, Fuller signed a scholarship with Arkansas-Pine Bluff, but was a role player for the team, again never able to recapture the glory of his high school career. But he did complete a four-year degree in community recreation and returned to teach at the Arkansas School for the Deaf. Now married and with four hearing children, he has been with the postal service in Oklahoma for nearly 28 years.

He remains close to Houston Nutt Sr.'s wife, Emogene. The mother of college coaches Houston Jr., Dickey, Dennis and Danny, she is currently working on a book about her husband, who died in 2005. A chapter is dedicated to an athlete she called, "the Wilt Chamberlain of the deaf."

"He is that phenomenal, once-in-a-lifetime athlete that coaches dream of," Emogene said. "My husband had him, and he loved him so much. Our lives for 31 years were dedicated to this school. It was my husband's dream in life to grow up and work there and make life better for deaf people.

"I know he did that, and there are so many other reasons, but Bennie, particularly, made all those years for my husband, his effort, dedication and that labor of love, mean something almost spiritual. There was no one like Bennie before him in our deaf community and there has certainly been no one like him since.

"I hope Pensacola understands that his story is important."